

Arabia: protest and revolution – An Interview with Saad Al-Faqih

BY MAHAN ABEDIN, 10 MARCH 2011

Demonstrations and protests are planned in Saudi Arabia on Friday 11 March. If the street protests take place, that will be the surest sign yet that the region-wide dynamic of revolt and change has penetrated one of the world's most closed societies. At the centre of opposition to the ruling House of Saud – who have ruled sizeable parts of the Arabian Peninsula intermittently since 1744 – is the London-based Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) led by former surgeon Dr. Saad al-Faqih.



Saad al-Faqih was born in Zubair (southern Iraq) to a Najdi family in 1957. He was professor of surgery at King Saud University until March 1994. He was jailed for his heavy involvement in the country's reform movement. On his release from prison, he became director of the London office of the Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), then the leading Saudi opposition group. He left CDLR to form MIRA in 1996. MIRA broadcasts everyday (except weekends) into Saudi Arabia for 2-3 hours. You can learn more about the group by visiting their English-language website: www.islahi.info. The more frequently updated website in Arabic is Islah.info [both sites are no longer accessible – 15.09.2016].

Mahan Abedin – Saudi Arabia was one of Mubarak's staunchest supporters. To what extent should the Kingdom worry about an Egyptian backlash?

Saad Al-Faqih – The current regime in Egypt will not have any problems with Saudi Arabia. [Field Marshal Mohammad Hussein] Tantawi [the head of Egypt's ruling Higher Military Council] is a very close friend of the Saudi royal family. However, after elections take place in six months or so and following the establishment of a truly democratic and accountable government in Egypt the situation may change. But Egyptians are not vengeful by nature. They will deal with the sensitive files in a nationalistic way. It will be in Egypt's national interest to open some files relating to Saudi Arabia's relations with the former Egyptian regime.

Mahan Abedin – Like what?

Saad Al-Faqih – Like handing over Egyptians resident in Saudi Arabia to the former Egyptian regime and the various types of support extended to Mubarak and his entourage. More broadly, since Egypt is a very important country in the region they are likely to start clashing with the Saudis on a range of regional and international issues. For example, the Saudis are fully supportive of Western policy towards Israel and the Palestinians. A truly democratic government in Cairo would be supportive of the Palestinians, in particular supportive of Palestinian rights in the Gaza Strip. This will cause an immediate clash with Saudi policy.

The new government in Egypt may also undertake new policies that clash with Saudi and American interests. Egypt controls the satellite broadcaster NileSat which the Saudis have used extensively to promote their views at a regional and international level. The new Egyptian administration might consider giving a stronger voice to democratic and Islamic voices across the region. Who knows, they may even allow us [MIRA] to use NileSat to broadcast into Saudi Arabia. As you can see there is a very real possibility of friction between a democratic Egypt and the Saudi regime across a range of issues.

Mahan Abedin – How worried are the Saudis by the prospect of the re-emergence of a free and independent Egypt on the world stage?

Saad Al-Faqih – They are worried by more immediate problems of their own. They have to contend with three immediate problems in the following order of importance; 1) the regional dynamic of revolt and rebellion which started in Tunisia and Egypt and which will soon hit the Kingdom; 2) the deep rifts in the royal family; 3) the illnesses of King Abdullah and Princes Sultan and Nayef.

Mahan Abedin – We'll discuss these points later. Sticking with Egypt, can the Saudis co-opt or bribe the Egyptian Revolution?

Saad Al-Faqih – No! If Egypt makes the transition to a full-fledged democracy it is going to be very hard to seduce or bribe that country.

Mahan Abedin – Looking at other regional revolts, can Saudi Arabia afford to stand by and watch Bahrain undergo meaningful reforms?

Saad Al-Faqih – The Saudis are not worried by Bahrain's influence on Saudi society; their concerns are focussed on Bahrain itself. They are worried by the removal of the Al-Khalifa family because the Bahraini royal family is completely subservient to them. Ironically the Saudis are exploiting the sectarian dimension of the revolt in Bahrain to frighten the majority Sunni population in Saudi Arabia.

But in response to your question the Saudis are not standing idly by, in fact they are throwing significant resources into helping the Bahraini monarchy to weather the storm. They have sent hundreds of Saudi troops, police and national guards under a Bahraini banner. But at a political level, the Saudis are at a loss as to what to do next. They don't have the ability to change the

direction of events on the ground. For example, the Saudis don't have the tools to mobilise or at least utilise the Sunni population in Bahrain. The Saudis don't have direct access to the main Sunni centres of power in Bahrain. They were not far-sighted and imaginative enough to make such long-term political investments.

The Saudis have little clue on how to convert social power into political power. In any case the Saudis can't help the influential Sunnis in Bahrain to mobilise in the form of political parties and other associations with a view to checking and contesting the rise of Shia political power, because they fear the inspirational example of this type of mobilisation on their own Sunni population. The Saudis want the Sunnis in Arabia to be solely dependent on the regime – as opposed to relying on their own social and political capital – for protection against a perceived Shia political threat. So the only thing they can do is to lend hard power support to the Bahraini authorities in the form of a few hundred policemen, troops and national guardsmen.

Mahan Abedin – *Can the revolt in Bahrain overthrow the Al-Khalifa monarchy?*

Saad Al-Faqih – If the regime in Bahrain deals with the revolt with purely security and military means they are going to be in real trouble very soon. But I have been told by reliable sources that the Sunnis in Bahrain recognise the dangers posed by the sectarian dimension of the revolt and are beginning to mobilise *independently* of the Al-Khalifa ruling clan. The Sunni elites have set up a coalition comprised of six groups and these groups have already begun to mobilise on the streets with a view to challenging Shia slogans and demands. The objective is to show that the Shias are not the only power in the country. This coalition is also protesting at some of the concessions granted by the Bahraini King in response to Shia demands. The Al-Khalifas may start to utilise this coalition to balance the Shia opposition. But if they rely solely on hard power then they are doomed.

The Sunnis in Bahrain are watching developments in Saudi Arabia very closely. The Sunni elites in Bahrain don't have much faith in the Saudi regime. They know that the only type of help that the current regime in Riyadh can extend to them is military support. But if a truly popular regime with a mandate from the people takes power in Arabia then that will be a huge psychological, moral and ultimately political boost to Bahrain's Sunni community. The emergence of Arabia as a proper Sunni power will eclipse Iran's influence and check Shia ambitions in the region.

Mahan Abedin – *This brings us to my next question, and that is to what extent can the restive Shias in the east of the Kingdom engender protests across the country?*

Saad Al-Faqih – The real calls for change haven't come from Shia leaders. The real calls for change in fact preceded the events in Egypt and Tunisia by many years. There have been localised and small-scale protests across the country for many years. Of course the events in Egypt and Tunisia have provided immense inspiration especially in so far as they have galvanised previously reluctant elements in Arabian society. These elements, despite hating the regime, were reluctant to rock the boat lest that lead to tribal and regional fragmentation and even American military intervention. In the wake of the victory of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions these fears have been proven to be false. This led to the formation of calls for nationwide protests on Friday 11 March. We [MIRA] know who these people [those calling for protests on 11 March] are but we can't name them for obvious reasons. But I can say to you they are not Shias. They are Sunnis from the heartland of the country. When they were producing their manifesto (which contains 18 points) they came to us [MIRA] for advice.

The Shias in eastern Saudi Arabia have mobilised in recent days and weeks primarily in response to the events in Bahrain, in addition to being inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. They seized the opportunity in the belief that the Saudi regime is too terrified by what is going to happen soon in places like Riyadh and Jeddah than to worry about the eastern fringe of the country. Moreover, the Shias in Saudi Arabia are a closed community with a cohesive grievance-laden

narrative which makes them more organised as a community. In that respect it is not surprising that they have moved first. Unlike our demands – as expressed in the manifesto on [Facebook](#) – the Shias don't have national and maximal aims. They are not looking to bring down the Saudi royal family. When you have less ambitious demands it is easier to mobilise people on the streets.

Mahan Abedin – *Do you expect big movement on Friday?*

Saad Al-Faqih – I am anticipating movement but with caution. The supporters for change are ready to move. Organisation is taking place behind the scenes. The events of recent weeks have all been in favour of the opposition. But what works against the opposition is the near absence of the culture of demonstrations, vigil and civil action in Arabian society. Moreover, the regime has successfully employed the sectarian card and even utilised the international broadcasting media to portray the opposition as Shia-based. We are working very hard to neutralise this message and tell the people inside the country that the Shias have nothing to do with the events planned for Friday and that the Shias have their own activities which are scheduled to take place on different dates.

Mahan Abedin – *You readily admit that the Saudi regime is brazenly using the sectarian card to divide and weaken its opponents. But as one of the key opposition groups shouldn't you be doing the exact opposite? Shouldn't you be bringing the Shias under a national umbrella and thus pose a united front to the regime?*

Saad Al-Faqih – We would like to but the problem is that sectarian polarisation runs deep and the people in Arabia and elsewhere in region are highly charged about the sectarian issue. The Saudi regime and some Sunni groups have worked very hard in recent years to convince many Saudi Sunnis that all our problems are linked to Iran and the Shias. So the problem is not dictatorship, corruption, poverty, lack of opportunity, not even Israel but it is Iran! That is the propaganda of the Saudi regime and its domestic, regional and international allies. There is an incendiary sectarian media battle in the region with about six TV channels mobilised on either side and they are constantly fanning the flames of sectarian hatred and misunderstanding. This is the prevailing environment in which we all have to operate.

Nevertheless, we try to avoid portraying Shias in a negative light by presenting them as a minority with a unique set of grievances which should be respected. I have publicly urged some Saudi Shia leaders to reduce their voice for the time being, until we achieve our core objective.

Mahan Abedin – *They are not listening?*

Saad Al-Faqih – No, they are not listening!

Mahan Abedin – *Focussing on the religious dimension, are there any divisions between the key centres of the regime and the Wahabi establishment over approaches to dissent?*

Saad Al-Faqih – The official Wahabi establishment, made up of the Senior Ulama Council, the senior board of the judiciary and the Ministry of Islamic affairs, are all with the regime. But at lower levels, some government officials, for instance the academic staff at Islamic universities and colleges, take a slightly independent line. They may disagree with the official line that all demonstrations are *haram* [forbidden on religious grounds]. They might argue that demonstrations are permissible as long as they are pursuant to just causes. One example is Sheikh Saud Al-Funaisan who wrote a thesis about demonstrations.

The problem with the official religious establishment is that it has lost its credibility in the past twenty years for two reasons. First, Sheikhs Abd al-Aziz ibn Baaz and Mohammad ibn al-Uthaymeen – who were considered the most religiously authoritative – passed away. Second, the regime has pushed the religious establishment too far in support of its policies and positions. The people have come to view the religious establishment as a mere mouthpiece or rubber stamp of the regime.

Mahan Abedin – *Under what conditions can Saudi opposition forces foment real divisions between the royal family and the Wahabi establishment?*

Saad Al-Faqih – The official religious establishment will not abandon the regime until it collapses. However, more and more religious types in the unofficial religious establishment are slowly shifting away from the regime.

Mahan Abedin – *What is the attitude of dissident Salafis to street protests? I refer to the likes of Safar Al-Hawali and Salman Al-Auda.*

Saad Al-Faqih – The Salafis are a wide spectrum. At one extreme there are Salafis who acknowledge the religious credentials of the regime while on the other extreme there are the Salafi-Jihadis who want to topple the regime through violent means. In the middle you find the likes of Hawali and Auda.

Mahan Abedin – *It is that type of Salafis that I am specifically referring to.*

Saad Al-Faqih – Both individuals were with the opposition in the early 1990s even though they never publicly denounced the legitimacy of the regime. When they were imprisoned they shifted towards the regime. More recently Salman Al-Auda and his followers have shifted yet again, this time closer to their original position. They have been supportive of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Auda has been supportive of demonstrations. He even signed a document calling for a constitutional monarchy. I don't think this signifies a real change in Auda's beliefs. The fact is that Saudi society has changed enormously. The people want change and the elites are forced to follow the people rather than vice versa. Those elites who seek popularity – and I include Auda amongst them – are forced to change their position so as to be in line with the majority view.



Mahan Abedin – *In view of what you said earlier about a lack of a culture of demonstrations and street mobilisations, how likely is it that sizeable crowds will take to the streets of Saudi Arabian cities?*

Saad Al-Faqih – In our country we don't need big numbers. Once you have a gathering of a few thousand the regime will be in serious trouble. As an opposition leader I will admit that in our country it will be very difficult to form what social scientists call a "critical mass". Arabian citizens are wary of protesting on the streets lest they are humiliated by a junior policeman who hits them with a truncheon, spits on their faces or who stands with his boot on their necks. The people can't

take this kind of humiliation. They'd rather protest with Kalashnikovs! This fear of humiliation and insults is rooted in tribal culture. But the events in Tunisia and Egypt have emboldened sufficient numbers of people to the extent that we can anticipate movement on the streets. Again I admit it will be very difficult to form a critical mass, but once this mass is achieved the regime will melt like snow. It will collapse quickly because it has no real institutions to sustain it.

Mahan Abedin – *But the regime has the capability to suppress especially if the number of protesters is small to begin with.*

Saad Al-Faqih – In our country the security forces operate in a different way than in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world. In our country the security forces are not isolated from the people. They live in the same community as ordinary citizens and are thus exposed to the same problems and share the same grievances. Members of the security forces comprise a major segment of our audience. I am referring to our satellite broadcasts.

Furthermore, the security forces are aware that the majority of the people are armed. They are also well aware of the culture of revenge which permeates every level of our society. If people are shot and killed on the streets there will be reprisals. The people who have contacted me in recent days have said that they won't initiate hostilities against the security forces but if they are shot at they will shoot back.

Mahan Abedin – *And this Friday will trigger the dynamics you have been speaking about?*

Saad Al-Faqih – If there is a demonstration of a few thousand in just one city then yes. The momentum is gathering pace. Even if this Friday doesn't produce the desired outcome there will be other opportunities in the very near future.

Mahan Abedin – *Will the Saudi regime be toppled this year?*

Saad Al-Faqih – You should ask me how soon the regime will collapse. I believe it will be in a few months. Even without an opposition the regime is dying. It is physically dying. King Abdullah is dying. Prince Sultan is dying. Prince Nayef can't walk for five meters without stopping.

Mahan Abedin – *If the regime is on the verge of collapse as you claim then the obvious question is what is going to replace it?*

Saad Al-Faqih – It depends on how or by whom the regime is toppled. Whoever exerts the maximum effort in the revolt is likely to have the greatest chance of shaping the country's destiny.

Mahan Abedin – *Does your organisation have the capacity to fill the political vacuum?*

Saad Al-Faqih – If Abdullah ibn Abdul Aziz who is a third year primary school graduate can be the King of that country then we also have the capacity to rule! At least we have some understanding of proper governance, democracy, the rule of law and civil society. We are familiar with modern institutions and modern democratic practices.

Mahan Abedin – *But what form of government do you have in mind? Do you envisage a constitutional monarchy or a republic?*

Saad Al-Faqih – We envisage a system based on electing the leader and the peoples' representatives, so you can call it a republic.

Mahan Abedin – *So you envisage the root and branch overthrow of the current system?*

Saad Al-Faqih – Of course! Even those calling for a constitutional monarchy are only doing so to protect themselves against reprisals by the regime. Virtually nobody believes that the Al-Sauds have a future.

Mahan Abedin – *Do you envisage an Islamic Republic similar to the one in Iran?*

Saad Al-Faqih – We want to be organised as a proper nation-state. All our procedures and form of government should be in line with prevailing international standards and norms. However, the source of our legislation will be the Islamic texts.

Mahan Abedin – *But that is how Iran is governed. The Iranian system is Republican in form but Islamic in spirit. What is wrong with calling your country the Islamic Republic of Arabia?*

Saad Al-Faqih – The problem is the name has been taken by Iran! We don't want to appear as a carbon copy of Iran. But in principle we don't have any problem with an Islamic Republic. In any case we will definitely change the name of the country. We are the only country in the world named after a family!

Mahan Abedin – *From a geopolitical point of view, if what you predict comes to pass then the emergence of an authentic Sunni power in the region may be able to balance Iran with a view to creating an indigenous regional security architecture.*

Saad Al-Faqih – It will over-ride Iran. Iran's core audience in the region and the Muslim world as a whole is relatively small and comprised of mostly Shia communities. Arabia on the other hand can reach an enormous global Muslim audience and inspire them.

Mahan Abedin – *What will be the likely American response to what appears to herald, at this stage anyway, a momentous geopolitical shift?*

Saad Al-Faqih – The U.S. has proven unable to do anything when the people decide to move. I suspect the Americans are going to have troubled relations with the emerging democracies in the region. The problem with American policy in the region is that they have a very high set of demands and expectations which can only be fulfilled by dictators who are divorced from the aspirations and views of their people. If you want Egypt to enforce a blockade on the people of Gaza then only a dictator like Hosni Mubarak can bend to your will. In regard to Saudi Arabia, the Americans pursue three core aims; 1) full control of the oil; 2) pacification of the Islamic world through the patronage and bribery of the House of Saud; 3) securing Israel, again by using the Saudi royal family to bribe and pacify Muslims in the region and beyond. These demands have been pushed intolerably far in the past decade especially in the wake of the 11 September [2001] attacks on America.

The Saudis have gone out of their way to meet these unreasonable demands. They pushed Egypt and Jordan further into line. They intervened forcefully in Lebanon to balance Hezbollah. They even adopted public stances against Hezbollah and Hamas. They blamed these organisations for starting the July-August 2006 war in Lebanon and the assault on the Gaza Strip in December-January 2009. I doubt very much if a legitimate government in Arabia would go anywhere near this far to please the Americans and the Israelis.

Mahan Abedin – *To what extent can the Americans adapt to the new regional dynamic?*

Saad Al-Faqih – If the Americans don't change their policies in the region then they are going to lose everything. They will lose the oil and they will lose security, for instead of having [Osama] Bin Laden and a few scattered individuals as enemies they are going to be facing entire countries.

Mahan Abedin – *Finally, in academic circles it has long been argued that the Middle East and North Africa are the only major parts of the world to have escaped democratisation. Is what we are witnessing across the region, from Egypt and Libya to Bahrain and Yemen, the beginning of the end of this democratic deficit?*

Saad Al-Faqih – I believe full-fledged democratisation along indigenous lines, in other words democracies that are in tune with local norms and customs, is inevitable. These new democracies

will in due course acquire a strong religious character for the simple reason that the basic social, political, cultural and economic reference points of the people of this region are Islamic.

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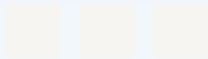
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